

# The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

Volume 8, Number 2

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## Special Seventh Anniversary Issue!

### Talking Twaddle with the Dead

A Book Excerpt from *How We Believe*

by Michael Shermer

Throughout much of 1998 and 1999, the best-selling book in America was by a man who says he can talk to the dead (and so can you, if you buy his book). It turns out that our loved ones who have passed over are not really dead, just on another spiritual plane. All you have to do is fine-tune your frequencies and you too can turn off the Here and Now and tune into that Something Else.

I am referring to James Van Praagh, the world's most famous medium ... for now anyway. He appeared three times, unopposed, on *Larry King Live*. He was featured on NBC's *Dateline*, and *The Today Show* and on ABC's *20/20*. He made the talk-show rounds, including on Oprah (who was mildly skeptical) and Charles Grodin (who was not skeptical at all), and even had Charles Gibson on ABC's *Good Morning America* talking to his dead dad. Cher met with him to talk one last time with Sonny. Denise Brown received a reading to make a final connection with her sister, Nicole Brown Simpson. What is going on here? Who is James Van Praagh, and why do so many people believe in him?

#### An Actor in Search of a Role

A brief glance at Van Praagh's biography is revealing. According to Alex Witchel of the *New York Times* (February 22, 1998), Van Praagh is the third of four children, born and raised Roman Catholic in Bayside, Queens, New York. At one point, he considered becoming a priest. He served as an altar boy and even entered a Catholic preparatory seminary—the Blessed Sacrament Fathers and Brothers in Hyde Park. His father is Allan Van Praagh, the head carpenter at the Royale Theater on Broadway (where his brother still works). His mother was Irish-Catholic and one of his sisters is a eucharistic minister. While attending college he found part-time work at the theater where, says Witchel, while the other stagehands were playing cards during the shows, Van Praagh "was out front watching, picking up pointers he still uses for his numer-

ous television appearances." The lessons were well learned.

His college career was checkered, including enrollments at Queensboro Community College, State University of New York at Geneseo, Hunter College, and, finally, San Francisco State University where he graduated with a degree in broadcasting and communications. Subsequently he moved to Los Angeles and began working in the entertainment industry, including Paramount Studios and a stint with the famed William Morris agency in Hollywood. He confesses in his book, *Talking to Heaven*: "I dreamed of a career as a screenwriter. As luck would have it, while coordinating a conference with the creative staff of *Hill Street Blues*, I became friendly with one of the show's producers. When I told him I would be graduating soon, he offered what I thought was my first big break." After graduation, Van Praagh moved to Hollywood where "I vowed that I would not leave Tinsel Town until I realized my dream and became a writer." Through a job at William Morris, Van Praagh met a medium who told him: "You know, James, you are very mediumistic. The spirit people are telling me that one day you will give readings like this to other people. The spirits are planning to use you." Van Praagh had found his role in Hollywood. He would act the part of a spirit medium.

In 1994 he was discovered by NBC's *The Other Side*, for whom Van Praagh made numerous appearances in their exploration of the paranormal. This, and other media appearances, generated countless personal and group readings, pushing him above the psychic crowd and eventually leading to his status as a best-selling author.

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## Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on a *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

**Annual Membership Rates:** Regular, \$20; student, \$15; family, \$30; patron, \$50 or more; subscription only, \$12.

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## REALL Contacts

REALL Hotline..... 217-726-5354  
Chairman, David Bloomberg.....chairman@reall.org  
Editor, Wally Hartshorn ..... editor@reall.org  
Web Site..... www.reall.org



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## Predictions

- More Weird Web Sites
- Book Reviews
- Skeptic Music



## From the Chairman

**W**ow. Seven years of REALL. I look back and find it hard to believe it's been that long. It seems like just yesterday that we put out our first issue.

Some things have changed since then; others have stayed the same. We're still the only active local skeptics group in Illinois and skeptical thinking is still a minority position. But now we're known both locally and across the country (well, in certain limited areas of knowledge, anyway). Some reporters actually contact us for comments when related news items are involved. We have around 55 members of varying levels, including 14 Patron members! We're an "official" non-profit organization. We've had increasing meeting attendance over the past year. And we have invigorated Board members who are eager to take on new tasks and promote new ideas!

This is not to say there isn't room for improvement. We still have one Board position open, for example. And we could always use more people writing articles, giving presentations, serving on committees, or volunteering to help however they can. Remember, you don't have to have "Ph.D." after your name to give a presentation (trust me, I don't have it and I've given several!). If you have looked into a given area and want to talk about it, please let me know. Or if you're not into public speaking, write it up and send it to Editor Wally.

We are always looking to improve REALL and to make ourselves more accessible to the public. To those ends, we have already made one change that I describe in my "REALLity Checklist" column. Also, we hope to expand the essay contest next school year and get more folks involved in that. If you have any other suggestions, please always feel free to e-mail them to me.

### Martin Kottmeyer Wins UFO Essay Contest

REALL's good friend and regular author for this newsletter, Martin Kottmeyer, won the International Zurich Prize in December. The contest, run by the Fundacion Anomalia (Anomaly Foundation), was looking for "original research either conducted on UFO events or theoretical in nature, both national or international in scope, that during 1999 better represents the objectives of rationality and scientific methodology applied to the study of the UFO phenomenon." Kottmeyer's winning article, "TranceMutations," dealt with nuclear paranoia in UFO myths. The article should appear in a future issue of the Spanish UFO journal, *Cuadernos de Ufologia*.

Congratulations, Martin!

### February Meeting

If you were at the December meeting, you may have overheard a preview of our meeting this month. If you weren't there, then you definitely shouldn't miss this next opportunity. Dr. Richard Walker and Dr. Rense Lange will speak to us about **How Nature Works: Parables Hidden in the Sands of**

## From the Editor

**W**elcome to REALL's special seventh anniversary issue! The first issue of *The REALL News* was created back in February 1993. Our first issue was 12 pages long, so it has become our tradition each year to make a 12 page issue for February. This gives us the room to print something a bit longer than normal.

This time we feature a lengthy excerpt from *How We Believe*, the new book by Michael Shermer of the Skeptic Society. This portion focuses on belief in communication with the dead. Death is a sensitive subject for many people, and often they seem to be particularly vulnerable to fuzzy thinking about the subject. Shermer's excerpt is certainly good reading.

Another annual tradition is David Bloomberg's "REALLity Checklist," a look back to select the highlights and lowlights of the previous year's events and media coverage. As always, the results will alternately make you smile and grimace.

In addition, we have a timely article about the placebo effect and how it effects both alternative and mainstream medicine.

Lastly, we have a few more book recommendations from David. It's too cold to spend much time outside, so dash out just long enough to buy one of these, then curl up in front of the fireplace and await the spring thaw.

See you in March! ♡

### Time.

Walker and Lange ask: Are you confused by living in a culture that forces you to choose between skepticism and faith? Reductionism and mysticism? Objectivity and subjectivity? Science and religion? Materialism and dualism? Well, Walker and Lange will set forth evidence from a broad range of research that there is a new and more comprehensive view now emerging. Based on the work of physicist Per Bak and others, they will explore a new model of how nature works: At all levels, an inherent process of self-organizing criticality.

This concept is surprisingly easy to grasp, both conceptually and mathematically. The good doctors will describe, apply, and illustrate it across a broad domain of fields, from economic depressions to the size of galaxies to earthquakes, and highlight its counterintuitive implications for science, philosophy, epistemology, and statistics. They will even show us a computer simulation of the sandpile model that led to Bak's original formulation, discuss its various surprising properties, and apply them directly to daily life. Sounds like a full night! Both Walker and Lange have spoken to us before, and they are always thought-provoking. I hope to see you there.

### Another Renewal Reminder

Just wanted to again remind folks that a lot of us need to renew our memberships between January and March. Don't miss an issue! ♡

Talking Twaddle with the Dead

(Continued from page 1)

Who does James Van Praagh say he is? According to his own Web page, "Van Praagh is a survival evidence medium, meaning that he is able to bridge the gap between two planes of existence, that of the living and that of the dead, by providing evidential proof of life after death via detailed messages." Van Praagh calls himself a "clairsentient," or "clear feeling," where he can allegedly "feel the emotions and personalities of the deceased." His analogue, he says, is "Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*." He claims that the "spirits communicate by their emotions," and even though they do not speak English or any other language, they can tell you, for example, "that you changed your pants because of a hole in the left seam or that you couldn't mail letters today because the stamps weren't in the bottom right desk drawer." He readily admits that he makes mistakes in his readings (there are so many he could hardly deny it), rationalizing it this way: "If I convey recognizable evidence along with even a fraction of the loving energy behind the message, I consider the reading successful." In other words, if he can just get a few hits, then "convey" the all-important emotional stroking that your loved one still loves you and is happy in heaven, he has done his job. From the feedback of his clients, this is all most people need.

The forty-year-old medium's message cuts to the core of most people's deepest fear and loftiest desire, as he told the *New York Times*: "When a reunion between the living and the dead takes place it may be the first time the living understand that death has not robbed them of the love they once experienced with family and friends on the earth plane. With the knowledge of no death, they are free to live life." No one has explained the attraction of this message better than Alexander Pope did over two and a half centuries ago, in his *1733 Essay on Man*:

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast;  
Man never Is, but always To be blest.  
The soul, uneasy, and confin'd from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come.*

By itself, however, this does not explain precisely how our Belief Engine drives us to be compelled to believe such claims. Why are we so willing to suspend disbelief when it comes to the afterlife?

## Gambling on the Afterlife

By way of analogy, consider the gambling games of Las Vegas. Gaming is big business, as anyone can see driving down the ever-burgeoning neon-glaring strip. In fact, gambling is the best bet in business, far superior to the stock mar-

ket, *as long as you are the house*. With only a tiny advantage on any given game, and heaps of customers playing lots of rounds, the house is guaranteed to win. For the roulette wheel, for example, with eighteen red slots, eighteen black slots, and two green slots (zero and double zero), the take is only 5.26 percent. That is, by betting either black or red, you will win eighteen out of thirty-eight times, or 47.37 percent, whereas



the house will win twenty out of thirty-eight times, or 52.63 percent. If you placed one hundred \$1.00 bets, you would be out \$5.26, on average. This may not sound like a lot, but cumulatively over time, with millions of gamblers betting billions of dollars every year, the house take is significant. Other games are better for gamblers. For straight bets in Craps, the house take is a mere 1.4 percent; for Blackjack, with the most liberal rules and optimal (non-card-counting) player strategies, the house earns just under 1 percent. These are the best games to play if you are a gambler (that is to say, you will lose more slowly). With other games it is downhill for the gambler. The take for some slot machines, for example, is a staggering 25 percent. That is,

you are losing 25 cents on the dollar, or, the house wins 62.5 percent and you win 37.5 percent of the time. Yet people still play. Why?

As B. F. Skinner showed in rats, pigeons, and humans, organisms do not need steady reinforcement to continue pressing a bar, pecking a plate, or pulling a one-armed bandit (slot machine). Intermittent reinforcement will do just as well, and sometimes even better, at eliciting the desired behavior. A "Variable Ratio Schedule" of reinforcement turns out to be the best for gambling games, where the payoff is unpredictably variable, depending on a varying rate of responses. Payoff comes after ten pulls, then three pulls, then twelve pulls, then seven pulls, then twenty-three pulls, and so on. When I was a graduate student in experimental psychology in the mid-1970s I worked in an operant laboratory where we created these variable schedules of reinforcement for our subjects. It is remarkable how infrequently the payoffs need to come to keep the subjects motivated. And this was for such basic rewards as sugar water (rats), seed (pigeons), and money (humans). Imagine how much more motivating, and, correspondingly, lower the rate of reinforcement can be, when the reward is the belief that your lost loved ones are not really dead and, as an added bonus, you can speak with them through a medium. This renders intelligible, in part, the success of someone like James Van Praagh, whose hit rate is far below that of even the lowest-paying gambling games in Las Vegas. It also helps explain the more general case of how we believe.

I once sat in on a day of readings with Van Praagh and kept a running tally of his ratio of hits and misses for each of ten subjects (one of whom was me), all filmed for NBC's *Un-*

*solved Mysteries*. Being generous with what kind of information counted as a “hit,” Van Praagh averaged five to ten hits for every thirty questions/statements, or 16 to 33 percent—significantly below that of roulette where the player wins almost half the time. But because Van Praagh’s payoff is the hope of life after death and a chance to speak with a lost loved one, people are exceptionally forgiving of his many misses. Like all gamblers, Van Praagh’s clients only need an occasional hit to convince them.

## How to Talk to the Dead

Watching James Van Praagh work a crowd or do a one-on-one reading is an educational experience in human psychology. Make no mistake about it, this is one clever man. We may see him, at best, as morally reprehensible, but we should not underestimate his genuine theatrical talents and his understanding, gained through years of experience speaking with real people, of what touches off some of the deepest human emotions. Van Praagh masterfully uses his ability and learned skills in three basic techniques he uses to “talk” to the dead:

1. *Cold Reading*. Most of what Van Praagh does is what is known in the mentalism trade as cold reading, where you literally “read” someone “cold,” knowing nothing about them. He asks lots of questions and makes numerous statements, some general and some specific, and sees what sticks. Most of the time he is wrong. His subjects visibly shake their heads “no.” But he only needs an occasional strike to convince his clientele he is genuine.

2. *Warm Reading*. This is utilizing known principles of psychology that apply to nearly everyone. For example, most grieving people will wear a piece of jewelry that has a connection to their loved one. Katie Couric on *The Today Show*, for example, after her husband died, wore his ring on a necklace when she returned to the show. Van Praagh knows this about mourning people and will say something like “do you have a ring or a piece of jewelry on you, please?” His subject cannot believe her ears and nods enthusiastically in the affirmative. He says “thank you,” and moves on as if he had just divined this from heaven. Most people also keep a photograph of their loved one either on them or near their bed, and Van Praagh will take credit for this specific hit that actually applies to most people.

Van Praagh is facile at determining the cause of death by focusing either on the chest or head areas, and then exploring whether it was a slow or sudden end. He works his way down through these possibilities as if he were following a computer flowchart and then fills in the blanks. “I’m feeling a pain in the chest.” If he gets a positive nod, he continues. “Did he have cancer, please? Because I’m seeing a slow death here.” If he gets the nod, he takes the hit. If the subject hesitates at all, he will quickly shift to heart attack. If it is the head, he goes for stroke or head injury from an automobile accident or fall. Statistically speaking there are only half a dozen ways most of us die, so with just a little probing, and the verbal and nonverbal cues of his subject, he can appear to get far more hits than he is really getting.

3. *Hot Reading*. Mentalist Max Maven informs me that some mentalists and psychics also do “hot” readings, where they obtain information on a subject ahead of time. I do not know if Van Praagh does research or uses private detectives to get information on people, but I have discovered from numerous television producers that he consciously and deliberately pumps them for information about his subjects ahead of time, then uses that information to deceive the viewing public that he got it from heaven. Leah Hanes, for example, who was a producer and researcher for NBC’s *The Other Side*, explained to me how Van Praagh used her to get information on guests during his numerous appearances on the show (interview on April 3, 1998):

*I can’t say I think James Van Praagh is a total fraud, because he came up with things I hadn’t told him, but there were moments on the show when he appeared to be coming up with fresh information that he got from me and other researchers earlier on. For example, I recall him asking about the profession of the deceased loved one of one of our guests, and I told him he was a fireman. Then, when the show began, he said something to the effect, “I see a uniform. Was he a policeman or fireman please?” Everyone was stunned, but he got that directly from me.*

## Deception or Self-Deception?

When I first began following Van Praagh I thought perhaps there was a certain element of self-deception on his part where, giving him the benefit of the doubt (he does appear likable), he developed his cold- and warm-reading techniques through a gradual developmental process of subject feedback and reinforcement, much like how gurus come to believe in their own divinity when enough of their followers tell them they are divine.

Human behavior is enormously complex, so I suppose it is possible that Van Praagh is *both* deceiving and self-deceiving, but over the years I have observed much more of the former than the latter. During the *Unsolved Mysteries* shoot, which lasted ten hours and was filled with numerous breaks, Van Praagh would routinely make small talk with us, asking lots of questions and obtaining information, which he subsequently used to his advantage when the cameras were rolling.

Is it possible he does not consciously realize that he is doing this? I contacted numerous mentalists about Van Praagh and they assured me that it is very unlikely he is self-deceiving because these are techniques that they all use, and they do so consciously and purposefully. I was told that I was being naive in trying to give Van Praagh the benefit of the doubt. I spoke to an individual who works a 900-number psychic hotline, who knows Van Praagh and many of the people who work with him in that industry, and he assures me that Van Praagh is not self-deceived. The psychic industry consensus, this source tells me, is that James Van Praagh knows exactly what he is doing.

That may be so, but as a general principle self-deception is a powerful tool because if you believe the lie yourself your body is less likely to give off telltale clues, making it more difficult for an observer to detect deception. I am fully convinced that

cult leaders, after being told for years by hundreds and thousands of followers that they are special, at some point begin to believe it themselves, making them all the more convincing to other and potential followers.

## Caught Cheating

Even for seasoned observers it is remarkable how Van Praagh appears to get hits, even though a closer look reveals how he does it. When we were filming the *20/20* piece for ABC, I was told that overall he had not done well the night before, but that he did get a couple of startling hits—including the name of a woman's family dog. But when we reviewed the videotape, here is what actually happened. Van Praagh was failing in his reading of a gentleman named Peter, who was poker-faced and obviously skeptical (without feedback Van Praagh's hit rate drops significantly). After dozens of misses Van Praagh queried: "Who is Charlie?" Peter sat there dumbfounded, unable to recall if he knew anyone of significance named Charlie, when suddenly the woman sitting in back of him—a complete stranger—blurted out "Charlie was our family dog." Van Praagh seized the moment and proclaimed that he could see Charlie and this woman's Dad taking walks in heaven together. Apparently Van Praagh's psychic abilities are not fine-tuned enough to tell the difference between a human and a dog.

The highlight of the *20/20* piece, however, was a case of hot reading. On a break, with a camera rolling, while relaxing and sipping a glass of water, Van Praagh suddenly called out to a young woman named Mary Jo: "Did your mother pass on?" Mary Jo shook her head negatively, and then volunteered: "Grandmother." Fifty-four minutes later Van Praagh turned to her and said: "I want to tell you, there is a lady sitting behind you, She feels like a grandmother to me." The next day, when I was shown this clip, one of the line producers said, "You know, I think he got that on the break. Too bad we don't have it on film." After checking they discovered they did, so Van Praagh was caught red-handed. When confronted by *20/20* correspondent Bill Ritter with the video clip, however, Van Praagh demurred: "I don't cheat. I don't have to prove ... I don't cheat. I don't cheat. I mean, come on...." Interesting. No one said anything about cheating. The gentleman doth protest too much.

As an example of the power of the Belief Engine, even after we caught Van Praagh cheating, Barbara Walters concluded in the wrap-up discussion: "I was skeptical. I still am. But I met James Van Praagh. He didn't expect to meet me. He knew that my father's name was Lew—Lewis he said—and he knew that my father had a glass eye. People don't know that." Ritter, doing his homework on this piece to the bitter end, explained: "You told me the story yesterday and I told you I would look and see what I could find out. Within a few min-

utes I found out that your father's name was Lew and that he was very well known in show business. And this morning I was looking in a book and found a passage that says he was blind in one eye—an accidental incident as a child—and he had a glass eye. If I found that out, then he could have." While Walters flustered in frustration, Hugh Downs declared without qualification: "I don't believe him."

Where have we heard all this before? A hundred years ago, when mediums, seances, and spiritualism were all the rage in England and America, Thomas Henry Huxley concluded, as only he could in his biting wit, that as nonsensical as it was, spiritual manifestations might at least reduce suicides: "Better live a crossing-sweeper than die and be made to talk twaddle by a 'medium' hired at a guinea a seance."

## The Tragedy of Death

The simplest explanation for how James Van Praagh can get away with such an outrageous claim on such questionable techniques is that he is dealing with a subject the likes of which it would be hard to top for tragedy and finality—death. Sooner or later we all will face this inevitability, starting, in the normal course of events, with the loss of our parents, then siblings and friends, and eventually ourselves. It is a grim outcome under the best of circumstances, made all the worse when death comes early or accidentally to those whose "time was not up." As those who traffic in the business of loss, death, and grief know all too well, we are often at our most vulnerable at such times. Giving deep thought to this reality can cause the most controlled and rational among us to succumb to our emotions.

I experienced the full force of this reality on April 2, 1998. The events of that day prompted me to consider what I would say to someone who is grieving. The ABC television program *20/20* came to my home and office, then followed me to Occidental College to shoot some background footage in my critical-thinking course. I thought I would ask the students to respond to a question I routinely receive from journalists: "What's the harm in what James Van Praagh does?" The students had plenty to say, but one woman named Melissa told a personal story about how her Dad had died when she was ten and that she had never really gotten over it. She was sad that her father never got to see her play volleyball or basketball, or to see her graduate from high school. Her opinion of James Van Praagh was less than charitable, to say the least. She could not imagine how such a performance could make someone feel better about death. In a maturity beyond her years, she expressed her opinion that one does not really get over such a loss; one just learns to live with it: "When my dad first died I just wanted to get on with my life and not let it bother me too much, now I'm just trying not to forget him. Next year when I



turn twenty I will have lived ten years with my Dad and ten years without him ... so I guess that is when my life will begin ... like a new chapter or something.” At this point she was fighting back her tears. It was a very touching moment.

When I returned home I was preparing to send Melissa an e-mail expressing how tragic it must have been to lose her Dad at such a young age, when I read this e-mail from my sister:

*I was thinking of Dad today on this 12th anniversary and how proud he would have been of you and all you have accomplished with your life. For some reason, I have really been missing him lately, more than I have in a long time and it's still so hard to be without him. I really hope there is a heaven, even though I know otherwise, but the thought of never seeing him again, ever, is almost too hard to bear.*

*Love you, Tina.*

Our father died twelve years ago that day, April 2, 1986, and it is probably a good thing I had not realized that in class as it would have been very difficult to remain composed.

This was such a peculiar conjuncture of events that it prompted me to give some thought about what I would say to someone experiencing grief. Having watched James Van Praagh now for over five years, I would imagine he might say something to this effect:

*It's okay Melissa, your Dad is here now in the room with us. He's telling me he loves you. He says he watches over you. He loves watching you play basketball and volleyball. He saw you graduate. He is with you always. Don't be sad. Don't cry. You will get to see him again. Everything is fine.*

My response to Melissa, and to everyone who has ever received a “reading” from Van Praagh, is as follows:

*First of all, no one knows if any of this is true, but even if it is, why would your loved one talk with this guy you don't even know? Why would he choose to make his appearance in some television studio or at some hotel conference room with hundreds of other people around? Why doesn't he talk to you instead? You're the one he loves, not this guy getting \$40 a seat in a hall with 400 people, or \$200 a private reading, or two million dollars for a book filled with this sort of drivel. Why do you have to pay someone to talk to your loved one?*

In the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* (March 1, 1998) Van Praagh called me a “rat fink.” I take this as a compliment because to “rat” on someone is to tell the truth about them. In Mafia circles it means a crime has been exposed. On the *20/20* show Van Praagh offered this view of the difference between my work and his: “He makes his life beating people down, putting people down. I make my life healing and bringing people up. I'm not a circus act. I'm not a side show. It's God's work.” By now nearly everyone in America has heard what James Van Praagh says to aching hearts. Here is what I might say. It is not God's work, but you judge who is putting people down or bringing them up. To Melissa, to my sisters Tina and Shawn,

and to my own daughter Devin should I die before my time, I close with this statement:

*I am sorry this happened to you. It isn't fair. It isn't fair at all. If I were you I would feel cheated and hurt; I might even be angry that I didn't get more time with my Dad. You have every right to feel bad. If you want to cry, you should. It's okay. It's more than okay. It's human. Very human. All loving, caring people grieve when those they love are gone. And all of us, every last one of us, will experience this feeling at some point in our lives. Sometimes we grieve very deeply and for a very long time. Sometimes we get over it and sometimes we do not. Mostly we get on with our lives because there is nothing else we can do. But loving, caring people continue to think about their loved ones no matter how far they have gotten on with their lives, because our lost loved ones continue to live. No one knows if they really continue to live in some other place—I suspect not—but we do know for sure, with as much certainty as any scientific theory or philosophical argument can muster, that our loved ones continue to live in our memories and in our lives. It isn't wrong to feel sad. It is right. Self-evidently right. It means we love and can be loved. It means our loved ones continue to live because we continue to miss them. Tears of sadness are really tears of love. Why shouldn't you cry for your Dad? He's your Dad and you love him. Don't let anyone try to take that away from you. The freedom to grieve and love is one of the fundamentals of being human. To try to take that freedom away on a chimera of feigned hope and promises that cannot be filled is inhuman. Celebrate your love for your Dad in every way you can. That is your right, your freedom, your humanness.*

*Michael Shermer is the director of The Skeptics Society and publisher of Skeptic magazine.*

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## REALLity Checklist — 1999 in Review

by David Bloomberg

“News is a consumer products, like sausage. Be careful what you swallow.” — Author Unknown

No, I'm not going to change this year's column to look back at the last 100 or 1000 years. Besides, if I did that, I'd do it next year anyway. I've got enough to do just looking back at the past year, thank you very much.

But next year I think we will change something. It has been suggested to me that instead of just having me pick these “awards,” we should have all of REALL contribute. I think it's a great idea! So, starting now, I encourage people to submit nominations for any REALL-related category of media story to us. We will empanel a committee of a few people to whittle down the nominations and then have a vote. That vote will determine the winners for 2000 in review. You can submit a nomination for any of the categories below, or others that have appeared in the past (for example, we have had awards for best and worst research exposés in past REALLity Checklists); also, they can either be “local” (which I would say encompasses Illinois) or national. Nominations don't have to have appeared in “REALLity Check,” but can come from anywhere. I hope to hear from all of you!

So, with that, let me mention that, like any other year, 1999 had its ups and downs. Sometimes the media did a great job, and sometimes they needed to go back to the basics. Here are some of the highlights and low-lights.

### Best Local Story Award

I'm glad to say that there were actually several local stories in the running for this award. But the utter silliness of the subject matter for the winning story, and the humorous yet skeptical way it was handled by our winner, pushed this one ahead of the pack.

The winner is actually part of a combination of two stories, the first written by **Sean Dailey** and **Sarah Antonacci**, and the second written by Antonacci — the second is the actual winner. Both dealt with the “face in the tree” that appeared in early September and caused the formation and spread of urban legends, problems for the owner, and an episode of mass silliness to sweep over Springfield. (In fact, the episode was so ridiculous that the Oregon local skeptics group reprinted my article on it!)

Now, you may be reading this and asking yourself, “Hey, didn't she interview you for that second article?” Yes, she did. But that's not why she wins this award. Rather, the fact that she even *thought* to interview a skeptic and point out the silliness is what wins the Best Local Story Award.

As a quick recap, a tree was about to be cut down and had all of its branches removed. Then, at night, some people claimed to be able to see a baby's face in a knothole of the tree. WICS Channel 20 reported this as an actual newsworthy item (9/1). The *State Journal-Register* picked up on it and ran the first story (9/3). They pointed out that it looked, well, like a knothole. They also quoted folks who thought otherwise. One older woman proclaimed, “It's the Lord.” Others claimed a baby had been hung in the tree by a man who thought his wife had been impregnated by a black man. The face was obviously that of the baby. A search of the archives found no evidence that such a murder ever occurred. Picky, picky, picky.

The tree was cut down and Antonacci needed to do a follow-up on those who were upset about it. She quoted me noting: “... people see Mother Teresa in cinnamon buns, Jesus on a tortilla, Elvis in a pizza, and Kermit the Frog on Mars.” Just because something appears somewhere, that doesn't mean there is a supernatural force behind it.

The winning touch came from Antonacci's lines. She began the article: “Had it been a movie, it could have been called ‘Silence of the Limbs.’” And continued: “On Friday, the saga of the face in the ‘miracle tree’ ended when the tree ... was turned into miracle mulch.” Later, she wrote that some called the *State Journal-Register* and asked, “What are you going to do about it?” She noted: “The answer: Nothing.”

An honorable mention for contributing to the overall story goes to editorial cartoonist **Chris Britt**. His Sunday cartoon showed a crowd gathered around a tree, with one man pointing and yelling, “The tree is sending us a message!!!” The message on the tree? “Get a life you fools!” All of them deserve a pat on the back for handling such a silly situation with the skepticism it deserved.

### Worst Local Story Award

There were a few competitors for this one, including an *Illinois Times* article on acupuncture. But the winner has to be **Nancy Steele Brokaw** of *The Pantagraph* of Bloomington, for her September 13 article extolling the wondrous powers of the late **Greta Alexander**.

Brokaw recited the standard catch-phrases and added no actual documentation. The claims about aiding police departments were there — the evidence was not. Of course, Brokaw didn't bother to talk to any skeptics. But she noted what a nice woman Greta was. I have no problem with people being nice, but it simply doesn't have anything to do with whether or not she had psychic powers.

My biggest question is why Brokaw even bothered. It wasn't the anniversary of her death; nobody made any new predic-





tions based on her writing; etc. I mean, her supporters couldn't provide good evidence of her psychic powers when she was alive, why bother making the same tired claims now that she's dead? I just don't get it.

But as long as people continue to make claims about her, we must continue to point out the flaws. And this story was full of them.

## Worst National Story Award

Without a doubt, this award needs to go to *Discover* magazine for **Brad Lemley's** August article on **Andrew Weil**. *Discover* is supposed to be dedicated to imparting knowledge of science to the public, but this article failed miserably. It began on the cover, which featured a full-page photo of Weil and asked the question, "How good is the medicine of America's favorite doctor?" The answer to that question was nowhere to be found, nor was any semblance of scientific review. I felt like I was reading a "human interest" story from any random newspaper, where they cover science as a "he-said, she-said" issue.

Among other problems, Lemley knew of Dr. **Arnold Reisman's** earlier article about Weil in *The New Republic*, but didn't appear to have actually read it. That article exposed many of the strange beliefs of Weil and showed that one would not necessarily be wise to rely on him for medical advice, but Lemley apparently paid it no heed. Must have been nice for Weil to

be interviewed by a guy who is only interested in his side of the story, not the scientific side. Unfortunately, it was not so nice for *Discover* readers.

## Worst Political Move Award

We had a short drought in which no local politicians did anything particularly stupid in relation to the things we follow. That ended this year when Springfield mayoral candidate **Allan Woodson** (who lost) supported an unproven method that supposedly removed pollutants from coal before it was burned (as reported in the March 21 *State Journal-Register*).

This was fringe science at its fringiest. Two Springfield residents, **MacDonald Pine** and **Don Palmer** (you might recognize the latter name – he's written over 400 letters to the editor of the *SJR* in the past 10 years, often spouting strange things including this invention), were making the claim. Their invention has been rejected as unproven and risky by the industry. They made a lot of claims that just don't add up to any evidence.

But that didn't stop Woodson from supporting their technology, although did come out after the article and "clarify" his position, saying he would investigate to see if it actually does work if the money is there. Maybe he should have thought of that before publicly stating his support. ☹

# Book Recommendations

by David Bloomberg

**T**ime once again for some short book reviews. As a reminder, the scale goes from 0 stars to 5 stars.

*The Undiscovered Mind: How the Human Brain Defies Replication, Medication, and Explanation*, by John Horgan (The Free Press, \$25): Horgan delves into the area of mind-science, trying to figure out what, if anything, actually works. Overall, he doesn't have a whole lot of good things to say about those who claim to know what's going on inside others' heads. He points out the flaws in each domain, from psychology to Prozac, but says he hopes it will be considered constructive criticism. He raises some interesting questions about who a person really is, and pokes holes in arguments of those who say computers will soon have consciousness. An interesting book for those interested in the workings of the mind, but don't go in expecting him to have kind words for any one viewpoint. ★★☆☆

*Too Good to Be True: The Colossal Book of Urban Legends*, by Jan Harold Brunvand (W.W. Norton & Company, \$29.95): The best-known debunker of urban legends put together a full compendium in one volume. He discusses each legend, giving the most common version of it, and then comments briefly. He does mention some changes that have occurred over the years, but doesn't go into the detail that can be found in his earlier books. Unfortunately, he also didn't include an index, which means you need to use the table of con-

tents to find a given story – meaning you need to know its "name," which is not always intuitively obvious. ★★☆☆

*Carl Sagan: A Life*, by Keay Davidson (John Wiley & Sons, \$30): Davidson addresses all of Sagan's complexities in this rather long biography (one of two that came out at almost the same time). Sometimes, though, Davidson goes overboard a bit with unnecessary details. Aside from that, it's a good biography of a challenging subject. Sagan went through a number of ups and downs in his life and this book charts them all, explaining both how he saw things and how others around him felt about it all. ★★☆☆

*Almost Everyone's Guide to Science: The Universe, Life, and Everything*, by John Gribbin, with Mary Gribbin (Yale University Press, \$24.95): John Gribbin tried to write a book about science that was readable by the general public yet explained science properly. He does a pretty good job. In some areas, he is extremely successful, such as the way he links theory and experiment throughout the book, reinforcing the workings of the scientific method. "No matter how beautiful the whole model may be, no matter how naturally it all seems to hang together now, if it disagrees with experiment, then it is wrong." He also explains a good amount of science in a short space. The beginning part dealing with physics is a bit slow, and that may cause some readers to stop there, but it definitely gets better. ★★☆☆

(Continued on page 11)

## The Placebo Effect — Is it of Medical Value?

by Edvard A. Hemmingsen

Rituals performed by the medicine man to heal tribal members, herbal remedies of past Chinese cultures, therapeutic use of sugar pills in our own time, and many other means for purported healing often have relied on a single phenomenon: the placebo effect.

This effect may be broadly defined as a psychological or psychophysiological therapeutic effect produced by a placebo. The placebo may be an inert sugar pill or a saline injection which the patient believes contains a beneficial substance. Or it may be a device said to emit healing rays, a massage totally unrelated to the nature of the disease, or an aura of professionalism generated by a white-coated reassuring person in a room with credentials on the wall. Indeed, it may be any factor or procedure which helps the patient feel better.

Physicians and other health care workers have been aware of this phenomenon for a long time, but they have been reluctant to include such a non-scientific effect overtly in their therapeutic tools, because it could not be predicted, measured or reproduced. Another reason may be the stigma associated with the word "placebo." It is derived from Latin, meaning "I shall please." It is the first word of the vespers for the dead in the Roman Catholic Church. Over the centuries it has acquired a negative connotation and, when it first entered medical terminology, it was used to describe medicine given to patients to please them rather than to actually cure the underlying disease state.

The placebo effect only began to come under scientific scrutiny in the 1950s, when double-blind clinical trials were introduced for testing the efficacy of pharmacological agents. It revealed itself statistically in large groups of patients when, for example, one segment of the group was given a sham treatment (the placebo) while the other was given the active treatment. Part of the group receiving only the placebo would claim beneficial effects. Depending on the disease and the symptoms, the fraction that responded to the placebo ranged from a few percent to about half of placebo group.

With such notable results, why cannot placebos be put to regular therapeutic use? They can, in many situations, but only if we distinguish between disease and illness. A disease is an abnormal state of the body, something a physician can see, measure or otherwise identify. A cancerous growth, a lung infection or a blocked artery are such examples. Illness is what a patient feels and suffers, for example, pain, nausea, fatigue or insomnia. Although there is some blurring in the separation between the two areas, the medical community generally agrees on this point: placebos can be of help for illness, but rarely cure a disease.

It has been firmly established by many studies that placebos can lessen pain and other subjective suffering in some patients, at least for short periods. This is often the combined effect of (1) the patient's perception and (2) the body's natural healing process that progresses with or without the placebo. But it is also recognized that certain mind-body interactions do occur and may play a role in some instances. The mind influences certain physiological functions. Stress, for example, may elevate blood pressure or alter gastric secretion; strong fears may lead to heart arrhythmias and even death. Thus, the reduction of fear, anxiousness and stress when it is accomplished by the use of placebos can be very beneficial.

The body has a remarkable ability, with its immune system, to fight off diseases and promote self-healing. It constantly depends on this system, whether the threats arise from the breakdown or misbehavior of its own cells or invasion by bacteria, viruses and parasites. Barring certain epidemic assaults and severe body traumas, only occasionally do these defenses fail and lead to problems. This feature is central in the evolution of higher animals. Without it our planet would be inhabited only by simpler forms of life.

Recognized mind-body factors which may influence the immune system are stress and anxiety. This has been demonstrated in both humans and animals. For example, stress increases the secretion of certain hormones which in turn can decrease resistance to disease. By merely reducing such factors, the susceptibility to disease is decreased and the rate of healing increased.



A few studies have raised the possibility that the pain-reducing effect of placebos may have biochemical causes. It has been found that endorphins, which are chemicals similar to opium-derived narcotics, occur naturally in the brain. Because endorphins can attach themselves to the same brain receptor sites as morphine, it has been suggested that they are the brain's own painkillers. It is also possible that other biochemical processes and neural pathways may be activated by psychological mechanisms. But scientific studies in these areas have been inconclusive, and inferences made from them

have been mostly speculative and subject to controversy.

Many aspects of the placebo effect, real as it is in many circumstances, remain unexplained. Certainly, the mechanisms underlying it—and there may be many—are often not obvious and deserve further scientific inquiries.

Some will say that it does not matter how placebos work as long as they do. But should physicians prescribe placebos to provide relief to patients? This is a dilemma. If the patients are told that they are receiving sugar pills or sham treatment, the placebo effect will be lost. However, if the patients are told that

the placebo is a pharmacologically active medicine, the physicians are using deception and this is not ethical. Also, for illnesses that are helped by placebos, physicians usually have available therapies, including safe specific medications without significant side effects. These are used when the physician deems it proper, and no deception needs to be involved.

Sometimes medications without proven benefits are used; or proven medications are used inappropriately (e.g., antibiotics prescribed for viral infections). It is a fact that many medications used by physicians have not been subjected to double-blind clinical trials and therefore have uncertain degrees of efficacy. In these various cases, the benefits derived often may come from just the placebo effect. But these drugs are regulated and held to high standards of purity so their quality and safety is assured.

The most powerful placebo-type benefit a physician can offer a patient is the healing environment generated by the physical examination, the projection of confidence and authority, and the reassurances and explanations. Unfortunately, in these days of fast paced medical services, many patients perceive that they are not receiving enough medical attention from their physicians. Other patients are looking for less costly help, or want to avoid taking so-called “un-natural” pharmacological agents. These are probably the main reasons why so many people embrace strange and unproven therapies and herbal remedies commonly offered by practitioners of various types of “alternative medicine.” They are unaware that they are often merely subjecting themselves to placebo effects. For example, homeopathy and acupuncture tend to relieve just those symptoms—such as pain, nausea, cough, and short term depression—that have been shown to be relieved in controlled placebo studies and apparently to a similar limited degree. Regrettably, providers of such therapies never offer the kind of patient information and data that can be used for scientific studies or evaluations. So at the moment there is little or no objective evidence that these or other alternative therapies offer any additional relief, beyond that provided by the placebo effect.

But even so, is not this worthwhile? It depends on the situation and the implementation of the therapy. Sometimes the alternative approach is more invasive than the scientific one. For example, the now notorious 1997 NIH consensus statement on acupuncture (see “REALLity Check Special Report,” Vol. 5, #11, Nov. 1997) declared that there is evidence of acupuncture efficacy for postoperative dental pain. But why would anybody subject themselves to the discomfort of extensive needle insertion, with a most uncertain outcome, when administration of minor analgesics is as safe or safer and highly effective?

The limitations of the placebo effect—whether produced by sugar pills, useless herbs, magnetic fields, or by other means—must be recognized. To deprive oneself or one’s dependents of scientifically based medical treatments must be totally rejected. Safety also is an important issue. A physician may not have certain specific tools available to relieve troublesome symptoms, and may use a placebo-type treatment to try to help or comfort. But this is done without jeopardizing the patient’s health. This should be the goal for all health care workers, whatever they call themselves.

### Further reading:

*The Powerful Placebo* by A. K. Shapiro and E. Shapiro. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1997.

*The Placebo Effect*, edited by A. Harrington. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1997.

*The author is an Emeritus Physiologist at UCSD and the Editor of Rational Inquiry, the newsletter for the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry (SDARI). This article originally appeared in that newsletter, July-Sept. 1999 issue, and is reprinted with permission. Copyright SDARI. ♡*

### Book Recommendations

(Continued from page 9)

*Battling the Inner Dummy: The Crazy of Apparently Normal People*, by David L. Weiner with Gilbert Hefter, M.D. (Prometheus Books, \$17.95): Weiner revisits Freud’s id, which he retitles the “inner dummy.” Freud is even brought back to life in alternating chapters, working with an advertising agency to get the “inner dummy” concept out to the masses. In the more serious chapters, Weiner discusses many examples of “dummy” thinking, from a president who fools around with an intern to a multi-millionaire who cheats for a few bucks on taxes. Pertinent to us, he says the inner dummy reacts without any recognition of logic or reasoning, bypassing rationality and going straight to instinct. If true, this would perhaps explain why we find it difficult to get more people to, well, rationally examine various things. But there are flaws in the book – too detailed to go into here. Let’s just say he doesn’t apply his criteria in a completely objective manner at every level. ★★ ★



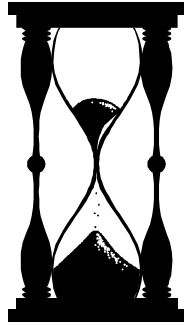
## Our Next Meeting

How Nature Works:

Parables Hidden in the Sands of Time

By Dr. Richard Walker and Dr. Rense Lange

Confused by living in a culture that forces you to choose: *Skepticism vs. Faith; Science vs. Religion; Objectivity vs. Subjectivity; Reductionism vs. Mysticism.*? Walker & Lange will set forth evidence about a new model of how nature works: An inherent process of Self-Organizing Criticality. This concept is surprisingly easy to grasp, both conceptually and mathematically. Lange and Walker will describe, apply, and illustrate it across a broad domain of fields, from economic depressions to the size of galaxies to earthquakes, and highlight its counterintuitive implications for science, philosophy, epistemology, and statistics. They will show a computer simulation of the sandpile model, discuss its surprising properties, and apply them directly to daily life.



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